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Rough Road to Peace

Hanoi's new seven-point proposal for a settlement of the Vietnam war has brought about no dramatic diplomatic breakthrough, but it has raised a glimmer of hope, as some U.S. officials have expressed it, that "something resembling a negotiating process may be in the making."

For "something resembling" negotiations to get underway, Hanoi will have to accept U.S. Ambassador David K. E. Bruce's proposal for a non-public session at which U.S. diplomats can get some much-needed clarification on several aspects of the North Vietnam peace proposal.

Notably, as Bruce pointed out, there must be clarification of whether Hanoi's offer to begin releasing American POW's concomitantly with U.S. troop withdrawals means what it implies, or means only that North Vietnam will be ready to talk about POW release when we begin pulling out.

Although the American request for clearing up this and other points is legitimate, U.S. diplomats should not approach the Hanoi proposal with such chilly cynicism as to blight negotiations in the bud. And there are a couple of disturbing signs that

this is what may be happening.

The CIA's analysis of the Hanoi plan, while not discounting it completely, interpreted it more or less pessimistically as a propaganda device aimed at embarrassing the U.S. and aiding the enemies of the Thieu regime.

In part, the CIA analysts speculated, the Hanoi proposal may be designed to "give some ammunition to those (in South Vietnam) who are working to build an anti-war, anti-Thieu coalition."

The CIA on this point may have read Hanoi all right—but the fundamental question, put bluntly, is: So what? The U.S. has never officially committed itself to maintaining Thieu against any and all opposition; on the contrary, it has always insisted its sole desire is that the South Vietnamese choose their own rulers.

Hanoi's demand that the U.S. force Thieu out is, obviously, unconscionable. But if the people of South Vietnam want Thieu out, the U.S. must accept their verdict.

And while the people are voting in Vietnam, the American diplomats in Paris must not let the desire to shield Thieu from domestic political opposition block the path to a negotiated peace.